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ABSTRACT

The dramatic growth of multinational agribusiness corporations has led to all types of rural decline--social, demographic, institutional, and environmental. Historically, rural inhabitants and rural land have been abused and neglected in the name of progress. Rural development efforts often attract small assembly or light manufacturing plants that can use the nonunionized, low-skill, low-paying labor of farm women. Agribusiness entails farm input industries that provide services and machinery, large-scale incorporated farm operations, and food-processing and marketing firms, whereas small diversified farm oprations utilize more natural methods of maintaining soil fertility, limiting their need for agribusiness. Agribusiness, therefore, has an interest in cultivating the large-scale operation, which drives out smaller farmers, which in turn, closes shops and businesses in small towns, and adds stress to rural schools. Agribusiness chemicals and machines increase soil erosion rates, pollute groundwater, and produce chemically-laden meats, fruits, and vegetables. The rural school curriculum should: (1) promote pride in rural living through literature with rural themes and settings; (2) conduct demographic studies of local neighborhoods; (3) debate the ethics of agribusiness and other capital ventures; (4) address environmental issues by conducting experiments testing groundwater samples and erosion rates; and (5) expose students to rural advocacy organizations. Rural schools should battle the increased emphasis on testing which largely dictates the curriculum. (KS)

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The Impact of Agribusiness on Rural Education

There has always been a great deal of rhetoric praising the successes of American agriculture. Few people talk much about its failures. Indeed, to suggest that there has been a negative side to the "production miracle" of the last forty years constitutes, for many people, little more than a social embarrassment. Nevertheless, the purpose of this essay is to explore the reality behind the rhetoric. If agricultural production has reached all-time highs, why are agricultural communities experiencing all-time lows? It is a simple question, but it is hardly ever asked. And it might be followed by such questions as: Why are rural schools and hospitals closing at rapid rates? Why is rural poverty increasing? Or why do 1990 census figures once again show decline in the countryside?

When questions such as these are asked, the range of responses is small. Typically, there are three possible answers. One is that rural America has been in a state of decline since our nation's founding. Note that there is no attempt to locate causality in this argument. The persuasiveness here is that things have always been this way. This is a pretty shallow argument for it in no way indicates inevitability in agricultural conditions nor does it suggest that such circumstances are just or desirable. A second response is that rural decline is the price of "progress." Again, there is no attempt to locate the cause of rural decline. According to this argument, rural dwellers, seemingly, are casualties in a march of progress that benefits some larger segment of society. it is amazing how similar this argument is to the one used by Stalin to legitimize the collectivization of Russian farms. Or, even more disturbing, it is highly reminiscent of the old "necessary evil" arguments advanced by some antebellum Southerners. The last plausible response to the question of rural decline invokes the grim realities of

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participation in an international market. The competing wheat harvests in Argentina, the soy beans of Brazil, etc., all necessitate a streamlined, efficient, agricultural production system that has no place for small, diversified farm operations. This is the most pernicious response for it is frequently wrapped in the cloak of a "science" of farm economics. Yet there are simple questions one may ask about these complex economic realities. For instance, why is it necessary to participate in an international economy? Who benefits from such participation? Why are those economists who contend that there is greater advantage in particpation in small local economies ignored (Schumacher, 1973)?

This essay will advance the argument that the only common denominator to all types of rural decline--be it social, demographic, institutional, or environmental--has been the pervasive growth of agribusinesses and agribusiness profits. Further, whether we in rural America recognize it or not, the agribusiness agenda is actively restricting the possibility of a vibrant rural America.

Democracy in the Countryside: A Historical Perspective

The circumstances that have contributed to decline in the countryside are justified on the basis of something compelling in the complexities of free market economics. Whatever these complexities are (and this is hard to say for they are rarely spelled out), they make rural decline inevitable and, by some accounts, desirable. Questions of ethics, justice, or simply good judgment are buried beneath production statistics. To bring these questions to light it is helpful to examine a tension that has long existed between those

who farm for a living and those who do not.

The first example takes us back to eighteenth century England. At that time Britain was expanding her empire largely through her ability to monopolize the production and sale of woolen cloth. Water powered spinning "jennies" and "mule" replaced human powered spinning wheels. As the ability to produce the cloth increased, demand for the raw product increased as well. There were predictable efforts taken to step up production. Investors sought to buy up common grazing lands and the small patches of various freeholders to enclose large pastures for sheep and their valuable wool. At first, every freeholder involved in a proposed enclosure had to agree to the sale or it could not take place. As Parliament became more and more answerable to non-landed interests, however, this requirement was revised so that after the 1750s only the permission of four-fifths of those involved was required. As mechanization in England's textile factories became even more productive, this figure was scaled down again, revealing an inherent tension between what is democratic and what is simply, progress (Thompson, 1967).

A second example consists of the circumstances surrounding the construction of dams on the rivers and streams of eighteenth century New England. Rocky, hilly soil meant agricultural production in New England was destined to be a tenuous affair. Free access to the Atlantic salmon, shad, and other anadromous fish that annually spawned in the upper reaches of area rivers was a significant source of protein in the diet of local farmers, as well as a barter and exchange staple in local economies. As capitalists moved in to tap the water power in these areas, they constructed dams that not only obstructed the free passage of fish, but also caused flooding problems for low-lying

farms. Although farmers fought the construction of these dams with petitions and law suits, and on at least two occasions, with hammers and axes; the desires of blast furnace owners and, later, cotton millers took precedence in legislation concerning water and property rights. Recognizing the inequity of these developments, Henry David Thoreau wrote in 1839, "Who knows what may avail a crow bar against that ... dam" (Hahn & Prude, 1985).

These examples illustrate that while it is true enough to suggest that rural depopulation is a trend that has been in existence since before the United States was created, this, in and of itself, does not make it right, just, ethical, or desirable. The demise of feudalism and the shift of power relations from a landed aristocracy to nonlanded banking, insurance, shipping, and industrial interests meant that the rights of farmers and rural residents have historically been neglected at best, but more often abused. Indeed, with the exception of Immanuel Kant and a few other German philosophers, the plight of farmers and peasants is conspicuously absent from the liberal thought upon which America was built (Blum, 1978).

Faith in progress replaced faith in tradition. The "tree of liberty," said Jefferson, "needs to be sprinkled every so often with the blood of patriots." He thought a revolution every fifty years or so would be good for the nation. Jefferson was willing to risk chaos and disorder because of his dedication to the notion that mankind would inevitably progress. But Jefferson yearned for a nation of small freeholders. "Let our workshops remain in Europe, the mobs of great cities add just so much to the health of the nation as sores do for the human body." It is a paradox, of course, that a man who wrote

eloquently about human equality should own slaves. Yet it is equally paradoxical that a man could put such faith in progress and continue to dream of a nation of yeoman farmers. Progress has never been kind to the countryside.

Despite government attempts to fairly promote the nation of Jefferson's dreams, those who professed an allegiance to progress consistently found ways to undermine these efforts to the advantage of speculators and large-scale interests. Railroads, for instance, historically received preferential treatment. Between 1850 and 1871 rail companies were granted 130 million acres of federal land (Vogeler, 1981). This is the equivalent of all the states of New England together with Pennsylvania and New York. And state governments granted rail companies an additional forty-nine million acres.

While on paper the rights of squatters on these lands were protected, railroad interests held all the cards. If a settler lived on railroad lands, they were forced to buy their land on the railroad's terms or they had no recourse but to find nonrailroad land to buy. In some cases this would take settlers 40-60 miles from rail shipping points. Under such circumstances, railroads were free to exact draconian terms.

Again, the purpose of this discussion is to expose the pattern set in motion by the political ascendancy of eighteenth century liberal thought. It is evident that as business spokespersons talked of equality, freedom, and laissez-faire economics, they felt these terms were more applicable to some than others. To overcome the dissonance between their rhetoric in Parliament or Congress and their economic encroachment in the countryside, they stood squarely behind the veil of "progress."

Democracy in the Countryside:
A Contemporary Perspective

At our nation's founding, about nine persons in ten were engaged in farming. It is important to note, however, that almost half of these were either slaves, indentured servants, or tenant laborers. Even at the outset, it seems, we were a long way from Jefferson's dream. By 1920, about one in three Americans were engaged in farming. Today the number is less than one in thirty, meaning that since 1920 over 50 million Americans have left farming (Vogeler, 1981). About 8 million left in the ten years between 1960 and 1970, a figure that represents approximately three million more than the number of remaining farmers today.

Although there was a turnaround in this trend during the 1970s, demographers who bravely spoke of a "rural renaissance" are now forced to admit that the trend was short-lived. Although rural outmigration in the 1980s did not reach 1960s proportions, this latest wave has taken a terrible toll on rural communities.

Contrary to popular perception, rural poverty rates in this country are higher than in metropolitan areas (Reed & Sautter, 1990; Porter, 1989). The rural unemployment rate in 1988 was 6.9 percent compared to 5.1 percent in metro areas. Thousands of rural health care and hospital facilities have closed down during the 1980s, making it increasingly difficult for rural people to obtain health services. The interstate commerce commission reported that between 1982 and 1986, 4,514 rural communities lost bus service, leaving many small communities more isolated than before.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota have conducted a study chronicling the information loss occurring in rural Minnesota. Major metropolitan newspapers are cutting

back delivery to rural areas because advertisers do not want to pay for circulation of papers to people who are not likely to be their customers. In 1965, 25 percent of Minnesota's rural households received the Minneapolis *Star* or *Tribune*. Today the figures are less than 10 percent (Donahue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1986).

And there is little need to go over the plight of rural schools in the face of 1980s rural decline. As even inadequate revenue became scarce, school officials predictably reacted with the exploration of pairing, sharing, and consolidation options.

These are the realities faced by rural America. They paint a rather dim portrait. And, of course, one person's despair is another person's opportunity. The only rural employment figures that are up in recent years are those depicting nonfarm employment of rural women. The 1980 census reported that over 50 percent of all farm women worked outside the home. This figure has more than doubled since 1960. Most of these jobs are the result of capital interests who looked to rural communities as good locations for small assembly or light manufacturing plants where they might obtain the nonunionized, low-skill, low-paying labor of farm women.

Rural "development" efforts are often considered successful when such plants are established. But the success of one rural community in this regard means the failure of another just down the road or in the next county. As rural communities contrive to attract potential employers, suspicions and animosities between local communities grow. Instead of cooperating to meet problems, communities are often encouraged by economists and sociologists to seek novel situations or capitalize on unique community amenities so that they, at least, will be a survivor rather than a casualty of rural America's decline.

The problem with this prescription, first and foremost, is that it inherently accepts winners and losers in the race for rural development. As well, however, it does nothing to address the mechanisms that have kept rural America in decline almost since our nation's inception. How much time will a successful development effort buy? Does it mean that rural community will keep a doctor, dentist, and school for five more years? Ten? Twenty?

Rural America, at present, is little more than a colony to be exploited by capitalist interests. This is obvious with respect to the low skill, low paying work that frequently shows up to take advantage of depressed agricultural conditions. But it is even more evident in that American institution called "agribusiness." Agribusiness entails, generally, farm input industries that provide services and machinery, large-scale incorporated farm operations, and food-processing and marketing firms. A few large corporations control most farm inputs. The Tenneco corporation is a good example. It is California's third largest land owner, it is the nation's largest marketer of fruits and vegetables, it controls J. I. Case farm implements, which in turn, controls International Harvestor implements. Tenneco also controls subsidiary packaging and retail grocery interests (Vogeler, 1981).

In order for farm input firms (machinery, fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, and feeds) like Tenneco to maximize profits they must maximize the sale of their products. Small, diversified farm operations maintain soil fertility through crop rotation, manuring, and pasturing; thereby eliminating, drastically, the size and amount of machinery needed as well as the amount of fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides required to maximize yields. Of course, these circumstances are antithetical to the desires of agribusiness. Large-

scale operations are clearly the way for agribusinesses to maximize profits.

True to the historical legacy described in the first section of this essay, the interests of scientific and technological "progress" have superseded questions of ethics or justice. Government programs designed to aid farmers have disproportionately distributed farm income according to the control and ownership of productive land. As an example, in 1972 4.2 billion dollars of federal subsidies were distributed by various farm programs. The average payment to small farmers (those whose annual sales totalled between $10,000 and $39,000) was $1,220. The average payment to large scale farmers (those with annual sales totalling over $200,000) was $6,646 (Vogeler, 1981). This pattern has consistently been repeated. The result has been that the largest operators most easily weathered the farm crisis of the 1980s. A countryside composed of large operators, of course, maximizes agribusiness profits and diminishes rural communities.

In 1981, farmers applied about 40 million tons of chemical fertilizers purchased from agribusinesses. That is approximately 330 pounds for every American citizen (Jackson et al, 1982). The irony of such staggering statistics is that American agriculture is plagued by overproduction. Yet through seductive advertising on television and in farm periodicals farmers are told that the answer to their problems is that they must become still more productive. While this inflates the profits of agribusinesses, it does little to increase farmer income, especially over the long term. More than this, of course, it drives smaller farmers off the land, closes shops and businesses in small towns, and forces children to take longer and longer bus rides to school.

Although research dollars continue to disproportionately support chemical and

technological production experiments, some inroads have been made by advocates of sustainable agriculture. As late as 1982, however, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported that of its $430 million research budget, less than $1 million was devoted to studies of organic farming (Jackson et al, 1982). Colleges of agriculture, created to be of service to family farmers, are now driven by research and development money granted by agribusiness interests. The farmer is increasingly isolated. And there are new dangers. Although farming has always been riddled with potential hazards, these have escalated as a result of the farmers' proximity to toxic chemicals through inhalation or direct contact.

At a time when we know so much about the interrelated nature and fragility of our environment, agribusiness chemicals and machines continue to increase soil erosion rates, pollute groundwater, and increase the anxiety of the American people about consuming chemically-laden meats, fruits and vegetables. These circumstances can hardly be said to exemplify progress. On economic, social, and environmental levels, the "progress" of agribusiness has brought a great deal of ruin to the countryside.

Rural Education and Agribusiness

There is little need to chart the connection between rural depopulation and the disappearance of schools, hospitals, transportation, and information services. Rural educators need to ask serious questions about the connection between agribusiness and rural depopulation. We need to unearth fundamental questions of equity and justice from the mountain of production statistics that support the myth of progress.

The Country Life Commission created by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1908 suggested that rural schools needed to work to improve the desirability of rural living. They had various suggestions for that end, including limited rural consolidation efforts. Their curricular and instructional suggestions were intended to rid country schools of the legacy of recitation pedagogy governed by the switch. Nature study and agricultural "science" were to be integrated throughout the curriculum; field trips, gardening, and orcharding were promoted to make instruction child-centered and active. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which was the fact that most of the commission were urban dwellers, historians have not been kind to the Country Life movement (Danbom, 1979; Bowers, 1974).

Yet there is something consistent and persuasive in the idea that a rural school curriculum ought to promote pride in rural living. I would not suggest that rural schools today adopt turn of the century Country Life prescriptions. However, rural schools ought to have rural curricula. For too long, schools have accepted the rather dubious duty of preparing students for the larger urban world outside the rural community. In this subtle way, rural schools have condoned dispossession and decline by educating youth to leave their communities behind.

Of course, there are extenuating circumstances beyond the control of the local school. In the first place, textbooks are written to appeal to the widest possible audience. Rural America does not count for much under those terms. Secondly, college entry is increasingly tied to performance on standardized tests, meaning that rural students have to be exposed to the tested knowledge domains; that is to say, rural schools have to

teach what urban and suburban schools teach or their students will be left behind in the race for college admission. Even more odiously, there are plans underway in various states to tie funding to test results. There have never been circumstances more capable of "urbanizing" rural schools than those that surround the contemporary testing movement.

Rural schools need to battle increased emphasis on testing at every opportunity. As well, they need to reclaim the school curriculum. Again, I am not suggesting a renewed emphasis on nature study or vocational agriculture, but a wholistic approach to centering the curriculum around the circumstances that affect rural lives. Literature classes, at all levels, might include stories with rural settings and rural dilemmas that could be sorted out, analyzed, and discussed by rural students. Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* or Hamlin Garland's *Rose of Dutcher's Cooley* would be excellent examples of rural characters who face the decision of whether or not to leave the rural community for urban life. Although much rural literature is not popular by national standards, it is nevertheless well-suited to the rural school.

Demographic studies of local neighborhoods would make superb lessons for mathematics classes. Correlating peaks of outmigration to historical events would be an ideal way to bring mathematics together with social studies, a combination that rarely works together. Debates over the ethics of agribusiness or other capital ventures in the local area would empower students with the notion that they can demand equitable and just treatment from the forces that touch their lives. Analyzing the television and periodical advertisements of agribusiness would be another fruitful activity for social

studies or language arts classes. When Dow Chemical Company says on television that "they want to keep this farm in the family for a few more generations," are they not misrepresenting the results of the use of their products? The increase in the use of farm chemicals, in fact, has helped cause the loss of family farms. At what point does the seduction of such advertisements cross over what is ethically acceptable in this country?

The rural science class ought to be intimately concerned with the environment. Here experiments testing groundwater samples, erosion rates, etc., would be directly related to the lives of the students. The science class would be an excellent place to explore the possibilities of sustainable agriculture that would truly protect the health of the rural environment for generations to come.

Rural students ought to be exposed to rural advocacy organizations and encouraged to join and become active members. Most of these groups, like Groundswell, the American Country Life Association, Prairiefire, or the Center for Rural Affairs, are interested in questions of ethics and justice. Because rural dwellers have become politically powerless, because they produce or live in close proximity to the commodities required by business interests, and because they have become a target for the maximization of agribusiness profits; they have not been treated ethically or justly. And America remains blind to this injustice because of an uncritical allegiance to "progress."

Conclusion

Obviously there will be several objections to the suggestions raised in this essay. Perhaps it is appropriate to try to anticipate these and address them straightaway. The

most obvious is likely to be concerned with the emphasis on agriculture. "Not all rural communities are based on farming," some will no doubt be quick to point out. But this seems to be a distinction of little use for it has the effect of dividing people who might otherwise be brought together. That is, by the terms of this argument, the rural dimension of people's lives is subordinated to how they happen to make a living. Yet fishing villages are certainly just as diminished by the trend toward large-scale operations as farming villages. The residents of mining and lumbering towns, too, have a right to know what the company will do for the community when the raw materials are gone. Minerals, timber, soil, or fish, the dynamics of exploitation have been a serious burden for rural residents.

A second objection will probably spring up on political grounds. Some will likely reason that the suggestions of this essay are in reality a case for one or the other of the two major political parties. The reality, however, is that decline in the countryside has been ongoing since the ascendancy of liberal thought in America, the political tradition that gave birth to both the republican and democratic parties. The class of business interests that made their way to political power have long held the same ability to extract wealth from the countryside that feudal nobles and lords held previously. But the Enlightenment generation had the added burden of reconciling this exploitation with the rhetoric of justice, equality, and fairness they used with great fervor to win their political voice. The curricular suggestions made in this essay are not about politics. Rather, they are about educating youth who are capable of putting pressure on leaders in both parties to live up to the rhetoric on which this country was founded.

A third question might be concerned with adverse parental reaction to such issues as those addressed in this essay: "What if parents complain about their children being encouraged to join Groundswell?" Admittedly, this is troublesome. Though most have not, some families have won on agribusiness terms. Victorious in a hard battle, large-scale operators are not likely to listen to anyone who suggests that it has not been won fairly. My response to this problem, however, is simply to suggest that lessons such as those discussed here would doubly profitable from the presence of divided opinion. Such a circumstance would intensify inquiry and further motivate students.

Rural life experienced staggering decline in the 1980s. Educational leaders need to take action that goes beyond the search for business partnerships or the recruitment of employers. We need to educate rural youth who will exercise their right to a voice in the decisions and circumstances that affect their lives. In this respect, at least, rural education in the 1990s needs to be distinctively rural. Rural communities, and rural people generally, need not be casualties on a dubious path toward progress.

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ABSTRACT

The Impact of Agribusiness on Rural Education

This essay relays some of the recent research clearly indicating that the decade of the 1980s has been devastating for rural America. In short, schools, hospitals, and main-street businesses have gone the way of thousands of family farms during the decade. The purpose of this essay is to explore the causes for all types of rural decline--social, demographic, institutional, and environmental. The argument here is that the dramatic growth of multinational agribusiness corporations is the only common denominator behind rural decline. Special analysis is reserved for the agribusiness impact on rural schools and what these schools may do to combat it.